

Yasar, Kerim. 2018. *Electrified Voices: How the Telephone, Phonograph, and Radio Shaped Modern Japan, 1868–1945*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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Kerim Yasar's *Electrified Voices* is an innovative study on how sound technologies developed in Japan from 1868 to 1945. It includes detailed examples of how sound was central to the creation of a modern subjectivity and used by the Japanese nation state for ideological reasons. The volume is a valuable addition to scholarship on the relationships among sound, technology, modernity, and the nation state in Japan. After an introductory chapter, the main body of the argument is divided into six separate and chronologically ordered chapters—each dealing with aspects of sound and technology in Japan—and a short “coda” to finish. I discuss each chapter in turn below.

In the introduction, Yasar outlines the major theoretical frameworks on which he bases the book. Drawing on Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past*, Yasar positions the historical development of sound and its reproductive technologies within a framework of modernity, critiquing a bias of the visual in scholarship. Alongside Sterne's work, he also draws on Mladen Dolar to posit the human voice as a “material support” for meaning that has an “absent presence” in its disembodied appearance in radio. The larger argument of the book is that sounds are part of an economy of modernity that alters beings' relation to sound and consequently to their wider social life; in developing this, Yasar expands Walter Ong's concept of “technologized orality” (where pre-modern orality has a residual role as a vector for tradition and reactionary ideologies in modernity) by redefining it as a phenomenon in which different media condition communication in different ways with different types of orality at different moments of conception, rather than orality as a single phenomenon to be technologized.

The author argues that “every culture” has its own relationship with sound, and that the case of Japan remains to be considered in a plurality of modernities through sound studies (Yasar 2018, 5). He presents Japan here as an insular island nation—part of a larger Sinitic culture that eagerly absorbed Western modernism at a staggering pace in the Meiji-era through the decisions of its political leaders (6). Yasar suggests that the Japanese language has specificity in its own limits and possibilities for negotiation with technological media that have yet to be explored in sound studies to move beyond technological determinism; he aims to consider the agency

of multiple human subjects and their specific historical conditions in distinctive social formations and power relations. Although one may question what appears to be another case of Japanese exceptionalism, placing centuries of supposed traditional language and culture against imported modern/Western technology, it is handled here in a more complex manner. Technological media are discussed as a means for agents to have the power of symbolic representation over less powerful ones; but the effects of such media have unpredictable results on an imperceptible process of changing subjectivities, brought about by the sound's affect on people.

The first chapter discusses a Japanese cultural tradition of the “spiritual power” of language and Edō-period dichotomies between written and spoken language. Yasar shows how, in the Edō period, texts were read out loud in a communal setting as part of a wider and long-standing Japanese belief in the kotodama ideology, the “spiritual power of spoken language” (Yasar 2018, 23)—a contrast with how written language started to be perceived as an abstract internalized text in the Meiji-era modernization. His arguments are largely based on Japanese literature of the Edō and Meiji periods, as well more recent studies on the phenomenon of kotodama. Yasar uses examples from *kōdan* and *naniwabushi* (forms of verbal storytelling) to show how oral traditions continued through technological changes in mass media; recordings were made of storytelling practices and sold on recorded disks, and the new modern printed newspapers were read out loud in communal gatherings, for example. Furthermore, he argues the abstraction of the word, as well as new technologies of sound (the telegraph and telephone) brought with it ideological and repressive uses by the government, as a means to construct both a national identity and community. He thus argues that language and sound are factors in the creation of the imagined Japanese national community (going beyond Benedict Anderson's [2006] reliance on print's role in creating a national community) to show what Yoshimi Shun'ya's work had suggested, namely that the telephone and other technologies do even more to homogenize nation space than print due to its strength as a medium of mass communication.

This chapter also traces a history of both the telegraph and telephone in Japan, through the lenses of national ideology and standardization. Language, Yasar argues, became a commodified and precious resource in telegraph use; each word used carried a price in order to be sent via a technology that materialized the national, spatial, and linguistic connectivity between Tokyo and Osaka, for instance. This argument is further enriched by examples of the telegraph in literature by Natsume Soseki, which reveal how this technology may have featured in Japanese daily life. Yasar represents the telephone as an inefficient and expensive means of communica-

tion due to the huge infrastructural issues that the operators faced from demand, used more as a curiosity in a ritual of modernity that afforded sensuous pleasure through the ability to hear someone else's voice.

In the second chapter, Yasar draws on a range of secondary literature in order to give us a (self-admittedly) brief overview of the history of sound in Japan. He treats rhetoric on Japanese sound in the Heian and earlier periods as a continuity of literary and oral practices that were interrupted by an encounter with “sonic alterity” (Western music) and the importation of machinery and technology; he continues that further subjectivity changes in the modernization process can be seen in the phenomenon of Japanese intellectuals' appreciation of Western classical music. This subjectivity change is explored in the context of economic, military, technological, and cultural asymmetries of powers with the “West,” which brought to Japan colonial attitudes dismissing Japanese music as noise (59–65).

This chapter also examines accounts from a select few Western elites in Japan. For instance, accounts from Naitō Takashi's *Meiji no Oto* and Edward Morse's writings, which Yasar relates to European Japonisme, colonialism, and orientalism because of their descriptions of Japanese music as unpleasant and noisy, and also the Japanese inability to appreciate Western music. Thus, the author creates an image of a Japanese soundscape incompatible with the Western ear and conceptions of sonic privacy, further reinforced by examples of Japanese subjects finding Western music cacophonous and discordant. Drawing on older Japanese narratives found in Kōsuke Nakamura's posthumously published *Kindainihon Yōgakushi Josetsu*, Yasar repeats the well-known story based on Japanese official documents—the Satsuma band played Western military music, then Western music is disseminated through Isawa Shūji's use of Western melodies in the national education curriculum to cultivate national pride and a reverence for the emperor (due to Western being more “accessible” than Japanese court music, a phenomenon which is not fully unpacked by Yasar, and seems to contradict his argument of the incompatibility of “Western” and “Japanese” sound) (72). Yasar argues that this process was one of “cultural suicide,” eventually leading to Japan developing a Western-type auditory culture (82). Several literary figures—for example, Mori Ōgai, Ueda Bin, and Nagai Kafū—adopted colonial narratives that idealized Western music as universal through its use of harmony. The sounds themselves (their rhetoric, social formations, publication, and listening conditions) are argued to be examples of Laird Addis' “isomorphic factors” —which are a phenomenon with ontological and temporal affinity that make possible new and potential future states of consciousness as part of wider political and economic power relations (75–76).

The third chapter changes gears, presenting an interesting survey of Japanese secondary literature dealing with the materialization, textualization, consumption, and the archivability of the spoken word through Meiji-era recording technologies. Japan was keeping up with such modern technological developments, but Yasar argues that this process facilitated capitalist consumption; the recording as a commodity is argued to have helped turn the recorded voice and sound into a memoryscape (using Koizumi Kyōko's [2013] definition) that created nostalgia and associations with particular times and places as a "timeless suspension" (Yasar 2018, 112). In his exploration of the development of copyright laws, and how this interacted with material recordings of "traditional" oral and musical performances, Komoemon's recordings of naniwabushi and kabuki are the main focus for analysis. Yasar further explains that sound and music serve as activators for such memoryscapes, both as creators and exploiters of nostalgia for economic profit.

Chapter four offers an impressive survey of the development of the Japanese radio industry. In the context of Japan's consumption economy in 1925, Yasar argues that radio's rapid adoption in urban centers was also related to nationalistic aims, such as unifying the nation with hourly health updates on the ill emperor in 1926. The Japanese phenomenon of the Rajio Taisō (communal ritual of physical exercise to the sound of radio broadcasts) is analyzed by the author as a form of media that brought the body, health, and physical exercise into the sphere of national ideology. He argues that the body, disciplined in space and time through the daily repetition of radio-directed physical exercise, was trained to submit to and obey disembodied voices of authority in such ritually inscribed bodily habits. Yasar further uses sports commentary broadcasting of the 1930s as a form of state-monitored oral performance—a concept inspired by Neil Varma's term, "theater of the mind" (Yasar, 126–127). Here, background information on individual broadcasters are brought to the fore, including discussions in sports journals, and examples of broadcast scripts being made into texts to be read, re-read, and also recorded and sold as records. Political events fueled the sale of radios and, according to Yasar, the Olympics served as an opportunity for the nation to be unified as an imagined community while hearing the coverage of the performances of Japanese athletes—who in turn felt the pressure of the entire nation listening for the first time. The fact the emperor himself did not speak on radio is framed here as a way to keep a mysterious, and numinous sense of power—a screen for the imagined community to project their fantasies on.

The following chapter discusses the language used in Japanese radio drama, and includes many examples and analyses of specific works and

social actors. Yasar shows how radio drama is an under-researched phenomenon that served as the impetus for new forms of performance by voice actors. He writes a new historiography of sound effects in Japan, from Taiko drums in Edō-period kabuki to the creation of vocabulary for the sound effects, and the development of such effects in theater, radio drama, and film. There are references to a rich amount of literature and sources to show the key individuals and developments of these sounds, but he concludes in a slightly essentialist manner that, in Japan, the aesthetic of sound effects harkens back to their “origins” in Kabuki theater, where there was no tension between nature and artifice.

The final chapter is an impressive overview of sound in film as a historical phenomenon, from the Japanese narrators of silent film to the synchronization of sound with film; also, Yasar discusses the representations and use of language in film and the contemporary narratives that surrounded such phenomena. He argues that film created a new form of spoken language to be used on screen, and the representations of regional accents became part of the Japanese debates on realism. This “film language” is shown here to have come especially to the fore in the adaptations of literary works for screen, where actors’ regional accents seemed incompatible with the modern Japanese language—texts were compromised and adjusted to the speech of the actors. The additional modern phenomenon of *jidaigeki* (period drama) is also argued to have required a new language that represented past Japanese eras through an intelligible modern Japanese language (stripped of European loan words) with the addition of some archaisms. Yasar also states media created a new modern form of speech specifically for women (*jyoseigo*). Thus, the author’s main argument for this final chapter is that standard, regional, gendered, historical, and film-language vernaculars were created for the imagined national community with speech and aurality at its core in film.

Overall, it is clear that the first few chapters rely on older Japanese secondary material. The inclusion of literary figures and Japanese academic work on sound and technology in dialogue with recent theoretical frameworks is a welcome development in this book, but it would be fascinating to further explore the relevant social actors and more accounts from the period in question. Yasar mentions that telegraph networks were built by a Danish company, so a good avenue for further work would be to explore the sources of the foreign communities in Japan—especially as hundreds of accounts regarding these technologies, based in Yokohama, Kobe, Nagasaki, Hakodate, and Tokyo (in other words, the places where foreign communities settled) appear in the newspapers and journals of these foreign communities. At times, it is slightly unclear whether the

Japanese-specific interactions with new technologies are being presented as interruptions of long and unbroken traditions, or as interactions between the Japanese language and oral practices in relation to top-down governmental implementations of ideology through technology. The second chapter opts for a narrative in which music and sonic practices represent Japanese and Western cultures as distinctly incompatible, one replacing the other through Japanese decisions that forced “traditional” Japanese music to retreat into the “iemoto system” (a set of hierarchical relations between the sensei and a collective of apprentices). My view is that such approaches, which focus on “traditions” against “Western modernity” mixed with the top-down Marxist-tinged understanding of society taken here, could be in danger of hinting at an understanding of Japanese culture as a progression of modern governmental choices that impacted a unique and bounded cultural tradition. This would be incompatible with an anthropological understanding of culture; for example, anthropologists such as Brian Moeran have argued that the iemoto system is still prevalent in all forms of Japanese arts, modern or not, and Gidoni-Goldstein has debunked Japanese myths of “origins” and bounded “Western” or “Japanese” culture, even in food and wedding practices from the Meiji period onward for example.

There is also a promising avenue for further work where contextual specificity, individual actors, cultural encounters, and transnational circulation of ideas could be brought to the fore from the hundreds of extant accounts in newspapers, diaries, and journals to give a more comprehensive picture of how the music of the “other” was perceived on the ground. Morse himself was discussed here in terms of the soundscape of daily life he experienced in the wider incompatibility of “Western” and “Japanese” sounds in cultural encounters, but his accounts on singing Western music to Japanese audiences or taking lessons in singing Noh could have been included, for instance. Chapter three discusses in detail the beginnings of recording and gramophone in Japan within the context of Japanese Kabuki, yet the key kabuki actor and rakugo storyteller that is thought to have made Japan’s first ever record possible, Henry James Black, is conspicuously absent in the book. There are many such individuals in Japan and abroad at this time, and earlier, that complicate narratives of “West” and “Japan” as incompatible cultural entities that only gain compatibility through Japan’s supposed cultural capitulation to a “Western” subjectivity.

If we are to move beyond the cultural essentialism implied by the suggestion that the Japanese adopted a negotiated “Western subjectivity”, through governmentally imposed sound, there is room for the inclusion of musicological work on Japanese composers, and debates from the period

in question on Japanese music and harmony (between Klaus Pringsheim and Tanaka Shōhei, for instance). One would be eager to learn more about why gagaku is described here as less accessible to Japanese audiences than the Western music chosen by the nation state (who were the specific actors in this nation state except Isawa Shūji?) if it was indeed cacophonous and discordant to Japanese ears, which seems to contradict Yasar's own argument of an initial rejection and incompatibility of the sound of the "other." The remaining four chapters of the book, on the other hand, stand out for their impressive application of recent theoretical work to primary sources and secondary literature, providing truly fresh and innovative work that reveals new perspectives not previously available in either Japanese or English.

Overall, in the context of a dearth of Anglophone scholarship on Japanese sound between 1868–1945, the complete reliance on limited secondary literature in the early chapters should not take anything away from Yasar's achievement of an excellent survey applying recent theoretical frameworks to literature previously inaccessible to non-Japanese speakers. He has clearly achieved his goal of laying a foundation for future work in an exploration of approaches from literature, media (including film), and sound studies. This book will be of great interest to anyone working on Meiji-to-wartime Japan, modernity, sound and technology, literature, and film.

Yasar states the next task will be to explore sounds in the wider Japanese colonial empire in comparison to European modernities. However, Shun'ya Yoshimi's 1995 *Koe' no shihonshugi* was one of "the three works that cast the longest shadows" over *Electrified Voices*, and so I would like to paraphrase from a short essay of Yoshimi's I translated based on a talk he gave at Tokyo University of the Arts in 2017. Yoshimi argues that the rapid development of archives and the digital migration of data and sources currently taking place in Japan will have a profound impact on the way we revise our understandings of the perspectives of historical actors in Japanese social and institutional history (Yoshimi 2017, 5). The revision of older historical narratives based solely on the sporadic and incomplete source analyses from the previous decades is a pressing task, especially if we are to build a more convincing historiography and archive to improve the understanding of the social and historical context in the Meiji-to-wartime-Japan period. Yasar's book provides the current benchmark as a foundation for such a revision to take place, but also a solid foundation for further investigation into sound in Japan from 1868–1945.

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